

music

With Paul Micich on electric horn, one gets a symphony full of sounds.

One moment his instrument sounds like a piano, the next you'd swear it's a harpsichord or a harmonica. Sometimes when he plays, you feel you are in the Andes Mountains listening to a pan flute. A pennywhistle sound carries you to the green hills of Ireland. When the instrument imitates percussion, your eyes search the stage for someone hitting a marimba. His flute sound then takes you to a peaceful Japanese garden. And your heart soars as his violin sound takes flight on Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." And shouldn't it?

The unassuming-looking music maker in the talented hands of Micich is the Electronic Valve Instrument (EVI). Reminiscent of a pesticide spray gun, it is a synthesized trumpet, a chameleon when it comes to sound, invented by Nyle Steiner in 1975.

It is a wind instrument where the musician's breath is used to cause inflections — dynamics, vibrato and sliding between notes — that bring expression to the synthesized tones. "The EVI is the perfect instrument for me," the Norwalk man says. "It provides me with different voices —



midwestern music with a global accent

WRITTEN BY J. SHARPE SMITH PHOTOS BY WILLIAM J. GENTSCH



The eyes have it. Shown here in his multimedia computer lab, Paul Micich displays a visual element, which complements and accentuates his music. He combines the ability to program computers, with composing music and creating art — a rare mixture.



diverse expressive tools, sounds and idiomatic ways of playing."

The EVI allows Micich to bring different accents to his music. He is fascinated with accents. He expresses this love by making music with a worldwide vision. This vision can be heard when he and his World Port band-mates improvise on tunes built from jazz and blues. Though the songs have no words, they speak volumes with different musical voices, whether reggae, Celtic, Cuban, Mexican, African, flamenco, Caribbean salsa, Indian or rhythm and blues.

"Those accents are what give us another expressive language to use when we are playing a tune," he says. "We use the inflections and expressive tools that excite us about a certain type of music and we improvise on them."

A world of influences

Micich grew up in Des Moines playing big band swing, rhythm and blues, German polkas, symphonies and baroque music. "We were thrown into so many different experiences, and I really enjoyed them and took away valuable things from all of them," he says.

Micich's other influences, appropriately, are an eclectic variety of musicians, including trumpeter Don Ellis, flautists Hubert Laws and Herbie Mann, violinist Stephane Grappelli, saxophonist Paul Winter, sitar player Anoushka Shankar and even the soundtrack for "The Bourne Identity."

Locally, the musicians that have touched him include keyboardist Sam Salomone, saxophonist Don Jaquess, and pianist Stu Calhoun, as well as those he has played with, including guitarists Dan Nicholson, Seth Hedquist and Mitch Espe, drummer Rob Messer, bassists Forest Stewart, Scot Sutherland and Steve Charlson, and percussionist/vibist Mike Pfaff.

"It is like going to a bazaar and picking little swaths of clothing and taking them back to your studio and putting them on your brush; it is a mixture. A lot of music knocks me out," he says. "When I started to play my own music, I wanted to use those languages. There is a cohesiveness to it because of our approach, our filter, our worldview."

After stints in Kansas City and Nashville, Micich came back to Des Moines in the early 1990s. Micich speaks of a feeling of freedom to express himself that he has found in Iowa. You get that sense of freedom and space as you look out of the window of the rehabbed one-room schoolhouse on his farm outside Norwalk.

"You are left alone to do what you want. What I do is completely different, but I think it is because I have the space," he says. "One of the jobs of an artist is to do what you think is the thing to do and find out where it leads. The audiences here have also given us a tremendous freedom to do it. It is the place and people."

Moving to Central Iowa has had a direct impact upon his music. The land inspired the album "Prairies," which was

Left: Micich's music is informed by a sense of freedom and expanse he has experienced living in a farmhouse on the plains outside of Des Moines.

Right top: Micich, a freelance illustrator, at work at his drawing board.

Right bottom: The Electronic Valve Instrument and Micich make interesting sound together.



the result of a collaboration with Mitch Espe on guitar. The effort produced the song "Horizon Home," which is an homage to that feeling of vastness of the grasslands. The partnership with Espe led to another album, "Stacking Stones," which echoes the first album's beautiful melodies with the straightforward simplicity of the two instruments complementing each other with a delicate subtlety.

Playing in a duo was a great experience for Micich and he still does it from time to time, but he believed that performing with a group of musicians would make his music more accessible to audiences. Bringing in a bass player, drums and percussion and sometimes two guitar players gives World Port a fuller sound with a wider variety of musical styles and improvisation.

The result has been three vibrant albums brimming with exotic sounds and rhythms — "Welcome," "Stories Without Words," and "World View" — that have advanced Micich's exploration of global-inflected instrumental music. It is an elegant, unpretentious sound, which is distinctive to World Port. The band is now in demand to play a variety of venues, from corporate parties to the Downtown Farmers Market, plus regional events like "Jazz on the Green" in Omaha and festivals in California and Washington state.

A life seen through a brush

Besides being a musician, Micich is a freelance illustrator who expresses himself artistically in a multitude of styles.



music



For "Where the Red Fern Grows" Micich captures the feeling of the adventure of a boy, Billy, and his two Red Bone Hounds, Old Dan and Little Ann.

Left: "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry" depicts a girl's fear of an angry mob.

Middle: A promotional concept showing Micich's lighter side.

Right: Artwork executed for an album cover for RCA BMG Records also projects a bit of whimsy.



Ascend the stairs of the converted schoolhouse, with its bare knotty pine walls and floors, and you will see a Spartan room with a single couch. Along one wall, various paintings featuring children are lined up. In one, where a frightened girl stands juxtaposed against a red and black image of a man with a rifle; next to that, a choir in turquoise robes in heaven is comically reacting to the littlest angel singing off-key; another shows a boy standing on a fence with his cat looking wistfully over the crops and a golden sky; and a mural captures a multitude of children in soft pastel colors deep in thought, each working on a project.

When Micich illustrates a book, he brings the story to life, evoking the emotion of the words. "The Littlest Angel," written by Iowa native Charles Tazewell, which sold a million copies, features paintings of Micich's son, stylized to be an angel. "It was a great experience spending three months doing paintings of my son," he says.

He has illustrated several books by West Des Moines-based writer Mary Kay Shanley, including "She Taught Me to Eat Artichokes" and "The Memory Box." One of the most gut-wrenching books that he has illustrated, according to Micich, was "Rhythm of the Seasons: A Journey Beyond Loss," the Marilyn Adams memoir (written with Shanley) of the loss of her 11-year-old son in a farm accident and her efforts to move forward with her life afterward.

"Illustrating books has a lot challenges. It takes all of my skills in design, illustration, conception," Micich says.

"Like with my music where I want to communicate with the audience, I want to create a depth of emotional content. With children's books, I have opportunity to have a continuum of images depicting surprise, wonder, humor, despair and fulfillment."

The list of his commercial clients is long and impressive, including The Atlantic Monthly, Sony Records, RCA-BMG Records, Campbell's Soup, Chili's Restaurants, Macy's, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, Meredith Corp., Drake University, the University of Iowa and Iowa Public Television. His illustrations for them have been well received, winning awards from The Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles, Communication Arts magazine, The Society of Illustrators, National Addy Awards Competition, Advertising Professionals of Des Moines and the Art Directors Association of Iowa.

Interfacing music and artwork

Micich is a creative person who needs a number of outlets for his creativity. It is part of his being. "Whether it is music or artwork, there is a certain discipline that has to take place," he says. "Sometimes I have to pull myself away from art to do music and other times I have to pull myself away from music to work on art, but I couldn't live without either one of them."

He recently has discovered a way to meld his artwork and his music. Using sophisticated computer technology,

“**I am fascinated by the color that I can get from the LCD screens. I am completely crazy about being able to use animation and motion.”**

Paul Micich

he is turning World Port's concerts in to a multimedia experience.

These days you will find Micich busy on the first floor of the converted schoolhouse, surrounded by racks of sound equipment, computers and gleaming video screens. If you look closely, you'll see his EVI horn lying amid the cables, strewn like spaghetti on the floor.

In this music/video art research laboratory, Micich is creating iconic, surrealistic and sometimes abstract images, which flash on screens and move according to the flow of his music. Computer programs combine full-motion video images of the musicians as they play with Micich's artwork. For example, in one image, you see the musician framed by the outline of a condor flying against a sky of clouds.

Micich refers to the video screens also as his "instrument." Though a strange concept at first, it is the integration of synthesized sound coming from the EVI with the video images. The two actually become one as the images interact with him as he plays. As Micich blows into the EVI, the sound keys certain images to be displayed and move accordingly. Pipers pipe, dancers undulate, pianos play, condors fly.

In a way, the images not only give him another outlet artistically, but they also give form to the music. In one image generated when the EVI sounds like a piano, you actually see a pair of hands playing huge black and blue piano keys. Each note played flashes a bright green. In

another song that features a haunting South American sound, the image of an Andean man plays the pan flute in time with Micich.

Accent a blue

Micich tells of the most beautiful blue he once saw coming from a stained-glass window in a church. He carries that experience with him to this day, and he has been looking for a way to express that color through his music. Indeed, several of his songs — "Andes Blue," "Blue Basket" and "Blue Horses" — appear to be a musical statement of the color. When he turned to visual images to help interpret his music, he found that the screens do a real nice job projecting the color blue.

"I am fascinated by the color that I can get from the LCD screens. I am completely crazy about being able to use animation and motion," he says.

The multimedia production makes Micich's music even more accessible to the public. A live performance becomes even more visual. Seeing the musicians on the screen surrounded by artwork as they play and animations of the EVI's instrument sounds will heighten people's awareness of the music.

What has been born is a new accent for Micich. This time the accent is being placed on the visual, as well as the musical. ■